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INFLUENCES WHICH DETERMINED THE FRENCH GOVERNMENT TO MAKE THE TREATY WITH AMERICA, 1778

THE motives of the French government for making an alliance with the United States in the midst of the American Revolution are assumed to be too well known to be worth further examination. The French historian Doniol wrote five great folio volumes, fully annotated, impressively documented, and representing an investigation pushed into every cranny of the French archives, and with some excursions into Spanish, English, and Prussian diplomatic pigeonholes. Half a dozen minor works, dealing with Franklin, Lafayette, and Franco-American diplomacy of the period, have been dug out of Doniol's vast quarry, and before his time Bancroft had diligently searched the muniments of Europe to solve the problems of Revolutionary diplomacy. Yet in spite of all this pursuit of alluring but ever fugitive truth, I believe the seductive goddess has eluded them all. There are two apparent reasons, one of which is that the essential parts of the key document had not been used by Doniol in his monumental work, and the second is that the very profusion of his material caused him to overlook motives actually revealed in his documents, but unheeded because they did not fall in with his preconceived ideas. He could not see the woods for the trees.

In the diplomatic history of the relations between France and America, there are two vital problems to solve. The first is the motive of France for giving secret aid to the American cause almost from the beginning of the armed conflict with Great Britain. There is no mystery about that, for so large and obvious are the historical facts, that he who runs may read.¹ The second problem is more shrouded in the mists of human motives, court intrigues, and diplomatic craft. Why did the French government, already overwhelmed with debt, abandon the policy of secret aid to the Americans which had been so rich in results, which had cost so little, and which seemed to be entirely successful, for a policy which meant certain war, and probable financial ruin, even if the war were won?

To make clear what is *not* sought in this investigation, let me

¹ Nevertheless it remained for Professor E. S. Corwin to state and elucidate them in the most convincing and accurate form in his article in the *American Historical Review*, October, 1915.

state briefly the French motive for giving secret aid. The basic reasons for French antipathy to England lay, of course, centuries back of the Revolution. These had been accentuated by the terms of the treaty of Paris (1763), which closed the Seven Years' War. This war began, asserted Choiseul, when England "threw at its feet the most sacred rules of equity, the most inviolable maxims of the rights of nations". "All the powers of Europe were alarmed at the scandalous rupture." "Its purpose was to invade France's American colonies, drive France from that continent, and seize all its commerce there." "But even this did not bound its ambitions." "It proposed to seize all of Louisiana, to penetrate by this way to New Mexico, and thus open for itself gradually the road to all the Spanish possessions." This was Cromwell's dream. "Indeed, they would go further. They would stifle our marine in its birth, rule the sea alone and without a rival."² The humiliating peace of 1763 was bought, said Choiseul, "at the price of our possessions, of our commerce and of our credit in the Indies; at the price of Canada, Louisiana, Isle Royale, Acadia, and Senegal."³

England [declared the eager minister to the frivolous sovereign, who was more easily moved by the charms of Madame de Pompadour than by the interests of his empire] England is, and will ever be, the declared enemy of your power, and of your state. Her avidity in commerce, the haughty tone she takes in the world's affairs, her jealousy of your power, the intrigues which she has made against you, make us foresee that centuries will pass before you can make a durable peace with that country which aims at supremacy in the four quarters of the globe.⁴

From 1763 on, Choiseul was the "Cato the Elder" of France, urging ceaselessly that England must be destroyed.

When Choiseul fell and Vergennes rose to power, the new minister had the same policy toward England. When the British colonies rebelled, Vergennes was eager to aid them. England, he said, in a memoir to Louis XVI. and his ministry, is the natural enemy of France. "She is an enemy at once grasping, ambitious, unjust, and perfidious. The invariable and most cherished purpose in her politics has been, if not the destruction of France at least her overthrow, her humiliation, and her ruin." "She is a restless and greedy nation, more jealous of the prosperity of her neighbors than concerned for her own happiness."⁵ "It is our duty then to seize

² Paris, Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Mémoires et Documents, France, vol. 581, fols. 3, 4.

³ Doniol, *Histoire de la Participation de la France à l'Établissement des Etats-Unis d'Amérique*, I. 2.

⁴ Aff. Étr., Mém. et Doc., France, vol. 581, fol. 41.

⁵ Archives Nationales, K, 164, dossier 3, no. 22.

every possible opportunity to reduce the power and the greatness of England." If they are foolish enough to exhaust their finances and to engulf themselves in a civil war, why should we interrupt them? Let us quietly watch them consume themselves.⁶ Again he declared earnestly, "Here is the time marked out by Providence, to deliver the universe from a greedy tyrant, who is absorbing all power and all wealth."⁷ Besides this motive of revenge, Vergennes's memoir and many others of the time dwell upon the fact that the fundamental economic interests of the French nation were at stake. The outcome of this struggle of England with her colonies would determine, they all assert, whether France should share in the commerce of America.

There were differences of opinion in the French cabinet, and the only policy that could be agreed upon, was that of giving secret aid. Turgot had convinced the king that while France could stand war if absolutely necessary, yet it should be avoided as the greatest of evils. Unless it was put off for a long time, it would prevent forever a reform absolutely necessary for French prosperity. "His Majesty knows", said Turgot, "that in spite of the economies and improvements already made since the beginning of his reign, there is between the income and the expense a difference of twenty millions." "The military and the marine is", he said, "in a state of weakness which it is hard to imagine."⁸ Secret aid was not entirely to the king's taste, but it was not over costly, and the royal conscience was salved by the insinuation that a precedent for it had been set by England in Corsica, when that island, a French province, was in rebellion. St. Germain, the secretary of war, had commended the idea.⁹ Vergennes had argued that it would keep up American courage and hopes, and Beaumarchais was passionately eager to execute the plan. On May 2, 1776, Vergennes placed in the king's hands a scheme for expending in America's aid a million livres, by a device so wrapped in mystery, so secret in its administration, that no British spies would ever detect it.¹⁰ Spain was to be asked to double this amount. Beaumarchais, in the guise of Hortalez and Company, began supplying the Americans with every manufactured article which that bucolic people so sadly lacked—powder, guns,

⁶ Doniol, I. 243–249.

⁷ *Ibid.*, I. 273–278. See Wharton, *The Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States*, II. 289, where Franklin expresses the idea that all nations of Europe wish to see England humbled.

⁸ Arch. Nat., K, 1340, no. 10, p. 53.

⁹ Aff. Étr., Correspondance Politique, Angleterre, vol. 515, fols. 179–180.

¹⁰ Arch. Nat., K, 164, no. 3 (Vergennes Corres., no. 9). Some of the documents referred to in this article and designated in the archives may be in Doniol, but I have not found them there and have used my copy made from the original in the archives.

clothes, drums, fifes, medicines of every sort, surgical instruments, and even cannons with the Louis XVI. monogram graven upon them.

We cannot here tell the story of French approaches to the Continental Congress, how that body was encouraged to accredit envoys to France, and to send its privateers into French ports with their prizes. If we enumerate the duties of a neutral, we shall find that France violated nearly every one of them. Vergennes was even confronted by affidavits sworn on "the Holy Evangelists of Almighty God" that in the French islands, English sailors captured by American privateers were held in French prisons and dying by "inch-meal".¹¹ Yet he never hesitated to trail England along with promises, evasions, and unblushing denials of facts plain as holy writ. Vergennes's correspondence with Stormont, the British minister, and with Beaumarchais, the French agent in American affairs, convinces one that had he enjoyed the ambidexterity which tradition attributes to Caesar, he would not have hesitated to write with one hand to the British government protesting his regard for the obligations of a neutral, asserting the friendship, good feeling, and peaceful intention of the King of France, while with the other hand he gave written orders to Beaumarchais to render the Americans every possible assistance. On one occasion Stormont asked the French government to restore prizes brought into French ports by American privateers. Vergennes answered, "You cannot expect us to take upon our shoulders the burden of your war; every wise nation places its chief security in its own vigilance." Stormont retorted, "The eyes of Argus would not be too much for us." Whereupon the astute Vergennes replied with unction, "And if you had those eyes, they would only show you our sincere desire of peace." Stormont said that even the French officers were hurrying to America. "Yes", suavely returned Vergennes, "the French nation has a turn for adventure."¹² Vergennes knew that an emollient answer turneth away wrath—especially when the recipient is chiefly anxious to save his face, and will prefer a palpable lie to an acknowledgment of a truth, which could have no other result than a war which England, just then, was anxious to avoid.

This was the state of the diplomatic relations of England and France in respect to America, when the news of Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga came over the sea to work its miraculous conversion. France was not long in exchanging peace and secret aid

¹¹ Aff. Étr., Corres. Pol., Angleterre, vol. 526, fol. 20, note.

¹² Bancroft, *History of the United States* (ed. 1866), IX. 286.

for war and open assistance to the American cause. We cannot know all that went on within the ivory towers of French diplomacy, but the reasons for this alliance must have been very strong, since the king and cabinet had been obdurate to every argument for eighteen months preceding the day when they seem to have seen a great light. Since the appearance of Doniol's exhaustive study all writers have drawn their explanations from his plethoric pages,¹³ following their historical bell-wether with Arcadian innocence, and all seem to have come from his account with much the same impression. Two points are dwelt upon, one that the Saratoga victory seemed to promise ultimate American success, and the other that the French government was fearful lest Great Britain should acknowledge American independence, and France thus lose American gratitude. In unemphasized passages of contemporary material quoted by Doniol, other motives appear, but these are the reasons which the author's treatment brings to the fore.

The most important document for interpreting the motives of the French government was used only in part by Doniol when he wrote his account.¹⁴ In a collection in the French Foreign Office entitled "Mémoires et Documents", so filled with meaningless, insignificant papers as to discourage the most faithful investigator, this key document was found by Mr. W. G. Leland, while making his guide to the materials for American history in the Archives of Paris. This document is a memoir by Vergennes on the foreign policy of France after 1774, addressed to the king in 1782, when Vergennes had been attacked by his enemies at court.¹⁵ A translation of its essential parts reads as follows:

The news of the surrender of Burgoyne produced in England an almost unanimous demand that peace should be made with America and war with France. Soon the echoes of this were heard in the British Parliament. The ablest members composing it were inclined to recognize the Independence of America and to make with it a league like that which Your Majesty has with the ruling house in Spain. This uniting the interests of the two people would make them as one in peace and

¹³ Doniol nowhere makes a brief, definite statement of the motives which he thinks determined the French government, but one is left to make up one's mind from a medley of vague statements, long quotations filled with a variety of matters, and partial conclusions which change from page to page.

¹⁴ Years after, Doniol wrote a brief work entitled *Politiques d' Autrefois: le Comte de Vergennes et P. M. Hennin, 1749-1787* (Paris, Colin, 1898). In this Doniol uses more of the Vergennes memoir in question, but does not even there use it all or point out its significance. In his great work *La Participation de la France*, etc., V. 187, he quotes briefly from some unessential parts of this document but uses it only to show that Vergennes felt called upon in 1782 to defend his policy.

¹⁵ The old partizans of Choiseul, Breteuil, ambassador to Austria, and Castries, minister of the marine.

war, and France would have to pay the price of this sacrifice. . . . The minister, Lord North, obtained from the majority a commission to be sent to America with great powers, to make a sort of preliminary examination of the ground as to American independence. If resistance seemed to be invincible, they might cede to America what it seemed no longer possible to take from it. All the negotiations which the British ministry attempted meanwhile through its agents with the American representatives residing in Paris, betrayed a disposition not far from complete surrender of their independence. They asked of the Americans only the semblance of dependence, a nominal dependence, provided they would unite with England against France. They would allow them the most extended exercise of all other sovereign rights. From the moment that we were able to perceive this disposition, war with England appeared inevitable whatever part Your Majesty might take, and the question reduced itself to knowing whether it was more expedient to have war for the purpose of upholding America or to wait until England united with America should begin it. This question of which the answer seemed easy was nevertheless discussed for a long time and thoroughly examined in different memoirs which were then submitted to Your Majesty. You examined them yourself and caused them to be discussed by those of your ministers whom you found it good to call to this important deliberation. I humbly pray you to recall that when it was a question of deciding whether we should treat with the Americans, Monsieur le Comte de Maurepas, urged by Your Majesty to make known his opinion, asked to be excused. He pointed out that the matter having been so carefully weighed and discussed in the memoirs and deliberations, it was for Your Majesty in your wisdom to decide, and that the ministry had only to await your orders and to execute them.¹⁶

Herein we note two new ideas, first, that the French ministry thought England was about to offer independence to America on condition of America uniting with England against France, and second, that as a result France was confronted by the necessity of war in any case, against England and America together as one horn of the dilemma, or with America against England as the other. This document is of course merely a reminiscent defense of a policy, and is therefore subject to two criticisms. Written to defend the author against the attacks of his enemies, it must be subject to the suspicion of distorting facts to make his case. Since it is dated five or six years after the events it narrates, we must beware of the tricks of the human memory. We shall therefore bring its assertions to the test of contemporary material. Before turning to that process, it should be noted that the general thesis of Vergennes's memoir is sustained or partially so in brief statements, almost contemporary, by Rayneval, Auberteuil, and Condorcet,¹⁷ while

¹⁶ Aff. Étr., Mém. et Doc., vol. 446, fol. 355.

¹⁷ Rayneval, in a Notice Biographique sur le Comte de Vergennes dated 1782 (in Aff. Étr., Mém. et Doc., France, vol. 446, fol. 359, and vol. 584, fol. 93 —here the date is 1788), says "Après ayant acquis la certitude que le ministère

the French historian Droz, writing in 1858, and Henri Martin, following Droz, got this same idea from some source we know not of. But all American and English historians fail to grasp this idea of the terrible dilemma with which the French cabinet imagined itself confronted.

Vergennes had been haunted with the bogey from 1776 on, that as a result of America's struggle for independence, France and Spain would lose their West Indian possessions. It was Beaumarchais's fine Italian hand that first planted this thorn which never ceased to worry Vergennes until the war was ended. Though Figaro was only a creature of Beaumarchais's fancy, the intriguing author was a remarkable embodiment of his own imaginary hero. He dwelt with comfort in the house of diplomacy, which has been called the chosen abode of lies. On his return from England after his curious adventure with the mysterious Chevalier d'Eon, Beaumarchais informed the king, by means of a memorial, that he had met one Arthur Lee in London, a representative of the Continental Congress, who had, in its name, offered France, for its secret aid, all the advantages of American commerce. But, Lee threatened, if France refused, America would send her first prizes into French ports, and force France either to admit or forbid them. Forbid, and America would accept peace and join with England in an attack on the French West India islands; admit them, and a rupture with England would follow anyway.¹⁸ Whether Lee or Beaumarchais

Brit'que fondait sa réconciliation avec ses colonies révoltées sur une rupture avec la France, et que la faveur ou la justice qu'il consentait à leur accorder devait être le prix des hostilités qu'ils commettaient contre cette couronne".

Auberteuil says of the British government, "Ne pouvant plus espérer de soumettre les Américains, elle désira se réconcilier avec eux pour déclarer la guerre à la France. Elle employa d'habiles agens pour rechercher et sonder les commissaires Américains qui résidaient à Paris, et leur proposer la paix, à condition que le Congrès réunirait ses efforts à ceux de l'Angleterre contre la maison de Bourbon." M. Hilliard d'Auberteuil, *Essais Historiques et Politiques sur la Révolution de l'Amérique* (Paris, 1782), p. 344.

Condorcet, who was a friend and correspondent of Turgot, writes concerning the influences leading to the alliance with America, "Inquiet du départ de commissaires Anglais chargés de porter en Amérique des propositions séduisantes, signa enfin un traité d'alliance avec les Etats-unis." *Éloge de M. Franklin* (Paris, 1791), p. 30.

Droz says: "Beaucoup d'Américains, mécontents des lenteurs de la cour de Versailles, ne demandaient aux Anglais que de reconnaître l'indépendance, pour s'allier contre nous avec eux. Tout annonçait que nous avions le choix entre deux guerres, dont l'une promettait d'être glorieuse, et dont l'autre pouvait être féconde en désastres. Vergennes n'hésita plus. Maurepas était disposé en faveur des Américains par son désir de plaire à l'opinion publique." J. Droz, *Histoire du Règne de Louis XVI.* (Paris, 1858), p. 198.

Martin says: "La réunion des deux Angleterres contre nous était à redouter maintenant, non point si nous faisions la guerre, mais si nous ne la faisions pas. Les Anglais pouvaient, d'un moment à l'autre, reconnaître l'indépendance des États-Unis au prix d'une alliance offensive contre la France." H. Martin, *Histoire de France* (fourth ed.), XVI. 422; refers to Droz, *Hist. du Règne de Louis XVI.*, I. 262.

¹⁸ Doniol, I. 402 (February 29, 1776).

invented this striking and terrible dilemma, I do not know, but the menace of its horns never ceased to worry Vergennes. At least he never ceased to pretend to be worried by them.

Frederick the Great, secret enemy of England, had even earlier planted at the French court a like insidious idea through his minister in Paris. He suggested that France and Spain "had best reinforce themselves in America, for if England gets a great army and navy over there, it will seize the occasion, after subjugating its colonists, to attack the Spanish and French possessions there"¹⁹ St. Germain in a memoir to Vergennes March 1, 1776, declared his belief that when England was through with the American struggle, whether she won or lost, she would recoup her losses by seizing the French West India islands. "The ease of conquest would suggest the idea and the excuses are easy to find."²⁰ Beaumarchais's suggestion had made its instant appeal to Vergennes's imagination, and in his next memoir to the cabinet,²¹ he dwelt upon it at length, and suggested secret aid and at the same time preparation for war. Even Turgot, in his reflections on Vergennes's memoir,²² thought it likely that if England failed she would wipe out the shame by an attack on Martinique and Porto Rico. Yet he suggests that England may be too exhausted financially. For Vergennes there was no such hope, and for the next eighteen months his letters are filled with warnings of that danger. He was continually plying Spain with reasons for being ready for war, and, indeed, any time after 1776 he would have plunged France into war with England, if Spain would have joined with her;²³ but our problem is, why did France, after Burgoyne's defeat, unite with America in war upon England without Spanish aid.

The fears of Vergennes were never allayed, but rather ever augmented by reports from England. Noailles, the French ambassador in London, wrote as early as November 8, 1776, that the British ministry would be glad to see a war break out between England and France and Spain over the Portuguese affair. Then they could gracefully drop the American affair, which they were now too proud to do. Indeed, Noailles wrote that Lord Rockingham, calling attention in debate to the growing armaments of France

¹⁹ Bancroft, *Histoire de l'Action Commune de la France et de l'Amérique pour l'Indépendance des États-Unis* (trans. and ed. Circourt), III. 63 (January 8, 1776).

²⁰ Aff. Étr., Corres. Pol., Angleterre, vol. 515, no. 24.

²¹ Doniol, I. 273-278, March, 1776.

²² Arch. Nat., K, 1340, no. 10, p. 42. "La morale de l'Angleterre en politique n'est pas faite pour nous rassurer"; he adds.

²³ Bancroft, IX. 64-66; Doniol, II. 696, 664; Aff. Étr., Mém. et Doc., France, vol. 1897, fol. 70.

and Spain, had proposed reconciliation with America at any price, and then an alliance with that independent people. The Duke of Manchester and the Duke of Grafton had seconded this proposal.²⁴ Again, December 31, 1776, he wrote that the news of the American loss of Fort Washington had made London wild with joy. Their madness knew no bounds. This delirious people were ready to defy all the powers of the world, and "they talk loftily of attacking France".²⁵ In May, 1777, the French spies reported that Lord Camden had shown full knowledge of French aid to America, and of France's preparations for war. "Let us have war with all the world", he cried, "but peace with America."²⁶ By August of 1777 Vergennes was so beset with his *bête noire*, that he told Stormont, the British minister, flatly, "your public papers, your pamphleteers, your orators, and ours, repeat ceaselessly that if you do not regain your colonies you will fall upon ours".²⁷

This was the state of mind of the French foreign minister when the news of Burgoyne's defeat came oversea to England and to France. After all these auguries of war, it is little wonder that trifles light as air seemed proofs as strong as holy writ. Simultaneously with the arrival in Paris of the news of Burgoyne's surrender came the news from the French spies in London that the Duke of Richmond had proposed in the House of Lords to re-establish peace with America, and form with it a family compact, in all the force of that term, which would put the two countries out of reach, and render them superior to all other family compacts.²⁸ Fox, wrote the Duke of Noailles, was occupied with the same object in the House of Commons.²⁹ Another agent discusses at length the ominous threat that Chatham will be recalled.³⁰ "If he re-enters the cabinet he will be the master, and his insatiable avidity for glory will not let him neglect the means which he will have in his hands if he can, of attacking France and Spain."

Although Vergennes hastened as early as December 6, at the latest, to assure the American commissioners in Paris that the king contemplated an alliance of some sort with America,³¹ yet we know

²⁴ Aff. Étr., Corres. Pol., Angleterre, vol. 519, no. 17.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 123.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 523, fol. 155.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. 524, no. 114.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 526. These spies not only reported the debates of both houses of Parliament, but even in some cases the discussions in the cabinet.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, fol. 163, December 5, 1777.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, fol. 154, December 5, 1777. Vergennes quotes this exactly, December 13, 1777. Aff. Étr., Corres. Pol., Espagne, vol. 587, no. 102.

³¹ Doniol, II. 626. He and Maurepas, he says, "think there is not a moment to lose in making friends with Congress—useful if we attach it, dangerous if we neglect it".

that the French ministry hesitated until December 17 before committing itself any further, and for a month after that it would have withdrawn from negotiation if anything untoward had happened, or if it could have shaken off the fear that America would make peace with England and form such a compact with it that France would be in danger of attack by both. Vergennes's diplomatic aims for a time appear in passages of his letters, as in that to Gerard (December 10, 1777), where he says he is too tired to see Deane and Grand who have just called, but "you see them" and "encourage them". "It is not possible to promise absolutely, but you can put them on the road to give to themselves the promise."³² On the following day he was writing Montmorin, "I will study meanwhile in the conference which I am to have to-morrow with the American deputies to so compass my language that I shall nourish their hopes without meanwhile engaging us beyond what is reasonable."³³ Moreover, he had told the commissioners that France ought not to act without Spain's approval, and had got them to await an answer from Spain.³⁴ These points are important since they reveal that December 6 was not the critical moment when the French decision was made, but rather some later date, perhaps as late as February 4, 1778, when the Spanish letter of January 28, 1778, arrived, and the French ministry knew of Spain's positive refusal to join with France against England.³⁵ Therefore all information which came to Vergennes meanwhile, strengthening his conviction that war was inevitable, influenced the final decision.

Letters from the secret agents of France in England continued to pile up the evidence that England sought peace with America, and wished war with France.³⁶ The Duc de Lauzun, writing from London, corroborated their fears, while the Comte de Broglie indited his usual memoir to the king filled with the same idea.³⁷ Every rumor from London confirmed these fears. The Duke of Richmond in parliamentary debate had declared that it was impossible for England to get peace with America on any other basis than that of independence. He urged a treaty of union like that with Scotland wherein the two nations would recognize the same king.³⁸ Chatham was reported to have made the same proposal.³⁹

³² Aff. Étr., *Corres. Pol.*, *États Unis*, vol. 2, no. 175.

³³ Doniol, II. 634-635.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 750-756.

³⁵ The drawing up of the treaty it is true had gone on, and after December 17, it would have been awkward for France to withdraw.

³⁶ Doniol, II. 648-649; Aff. Étr., *Corres. Pol.*, *Angleterre*, vol. 526, fol. 129.

³⁷ Doniol, II. 649-650, 668-670; Arch. Nat., *Marine*, B 4, vol. 132, fol. 20 (original of Broglie memoir).

³⁸ Aff. Étr., *Corres. Pol.*, *Angleterre*, vol. 526, fol. 226.

³⁹ Arch. Nat., *Marine*, B 4, vol. 132, fol. 20. See also Bancroft, IX. 478.

Lord North, talking of peace, was known to be working with the greatest zeal to get unlimited subsidies for war. Already sixty thousand sailors were voted, it was said, and it was not difficult to foresee the usage they would make of them if they could get their elbows free in America.⁴⁰ While French spies in London were daily sending the French ministry fresh proofs of the reality of their fears, Vergennes knew that the American commissioners were receiving agents sent by the British government to propose terms for a conciliation,⁴¹ and Franklin and Deane, while seeming very frank in confiding to Vergennes all that went on in these secret interviews, admitted with diplomatic innuendo that America might have to make peace with England, and even to turn on France because the United States got so little support in Europe.⁴² It seems to have been the astute policy of the American agents to create a jealousy in the French government by feigning to be near to a compulsory alliance with England, while at the same time they kept England on the anxious seat by affecting to desire an alliance with France. Carmichael, one of the American commissioners, put into Vergennes's hands a memoir pointing out that the help France had given thus far in money and arms was regarded by many in America as merely giving a little nourishment to the fire which would consume its enemy. If France, he warns Vergennes, lets England triumph, this force in America which united to France might put England where it could do no harm, will be directed against France. In America the love of conquest might replace that of patriotism. And Spain ought not to forget that England will console America for the loss of its liberty by the pillage of Spain's American possessions.⁴³ Paul Wentworth, the British spy, reported that Franklin in conversation with him (January 4, 1778) said, "It was affection to Great Britain which induced him to say that Independency was certain, that a few weeks would evince that he was still the friend of Great Britain, in wishing her to go before France and Spain and avoid a war on her part as well as prevent the colonies from engagements, which must be taken out of England's scale."⁴⁴ These clever American agents seem to have understood well the art of

⁴⁰ Aff. Étr., *Corres. Pol.*, Angleterre, vol. 526, fol. 248, December 13, 1777.

⁴¹ The assiduous Beaumarchais, ardent as ever for intervention in favor of America, brought this news, Doniol, II. 685. Noailles also suggested this, Aff. Étr., *Corres. Pol.*, Angleterre, vol. 526, no. 120, also no. 131 bis; Doniol, II. 648, note.

⁴² Doniol, II. 629-631. Also Wharton, *Dipl. Corres.*, December 8, 1777.

⁴³ Aff. Étr., *Corres. Pol.*, Angleterre, vol. 526, fol. 388.

⁴⁴ Brit. Mus., Add. MSS., 34415, fol. 27. Franklin had conditioned this interview "on the understanding that propositions of honor and emolument, if Franklin would bring about a conciliation with England, must not be made". *Ibid.*, fol. 18.

worrying both England and France to the eternal advantage of their native land. They made capital out of their report to Vergennes on the proposals of England's secret agent. "He made them understand", writes Vergennes, December 15, 1777, "that the British ministry was ready to grant everything almost to Independence, which they could not risk for fear of losing their places. All was tried, promises, seduction, menaces. The most positive thing was that instructions had been sent to Lord Howe to negotiate in America. The formal proposition is to unite cordially and to fall upon France and Spain."⁴⁵ A fear that haunted Vergennes was that Lord North taking advantage of the stress of circumstances would anticipate Parliament's action. "Give all news on the wings of haste", Vergennes wrote fervidly to Noailles in London, December 13, "do not spare the couriers". "Tell them to push on in case of urgency even to Versailles." "Be on the alert, watch Parliament, the ministry, and the ports. We may expect violent scenes and extraordinary resolutions."⁴⁶ "In the distress wherein the British ministry finds itself", urges Vergennes, "every means will appear good to it to escape from its straits. Although North has announced the coming January 20, for submitting his plans of peace and of war, I have some reason for believing that he will not wait this time to prepare a reconciliation with the Americans. Orders must have been sent very recently to Howe for this undertaking. . . . If he believed that he had the power to accord independence, he might have a good chance—all other conditions being more difficult." He begs Noailles to solve for him the question whether North would dare grant Independence and treat as state with state before having the consent of Parliament. He fears that the ministry in its desperation may do almost anything. They may well regard a new war as a remedy to the evils which now overwhelm them.⁴⁷ Even if the North ministry falls, one under Chatham will succeed, and "it is the same to us", cried Vergennes, "whether war comes from Lord North or Lord Chatham".⁴⁸

By December 27, Vergennes was wholly decided. "The question which we have to solve", he wrote "is to know whether it is more expedient to have war against England and America united, or with America for us against England."⁴⁹ Over two weeks before,

⁴⁵ Aff. Étr., Corres. Pol., Espagne, vol. 587, no. 105. More fully told, *ibid.*, no. 112.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Angleterre, vol. 526, no. 84.

⁴⁷ December 20, 1777, Aff. Étr., Corres. Pol., Angleterre, vol. 526, no. 110 bis; *ibid.*, fol. 248.

⁴⁸ Doniol, II. 649.

⁴⁹ Aff. Étr., Corres. Pol., Espagne, vol. 587, no. 135.

Vergennes had used in a letter to Spain the exact words of Beaumarchais, who, Mentor or Mephistopheles, was ever at his elbow during this critical period, whispering suspicions, and furnishing him with taffeta phrases which Vergennes never disdained to borrow in his next letters, while he kept a little at a distance and in the background this "Barber of Seville", who was too clever not to be used, but of too humble birth to be acknowledged. He wrote in Beaumarchais's words of the day before, "We must not forget that the power which recognizes the independence of the Americans first will gather all the fruits of this war."⁵⁰

This idea came also to dominate the mind of the king, as we see in his letter of January 8, to his "dear brother and uncle" the King of Spain. After discussing the effects of Burgoyne's defeat, and Lord North's proposal of pacification, he says, "It is the same thing to us whether this ministry be in power or another. By different means they unite to ally themselves with America, and they do not forget our ill offices. They will fall upon us as if the civil war had not been. This fact, and the griefs which we have against England, have determined me after having taken the advice of my cabinet that it is just and necessary to consider the propositions which the American insurgents make, and to begin to treat with them to prevent their reunion with their mother country."⁵¹ We have here the king's word as to the cabinet meeting to which Vergennes refers in his memoir, and, indeed, the archives contain what is almost certainly Vergennes's contemporary letter urging the king to ask each minister for a written opinion as to what ought to be done in the emergency, "the crisis in America".⁵² Even the contemporary memoirs, at least two of them, submitted to the king have been preserved in the archives,⁵³ so that Vergennes's reminiscent memoir of 1782 seems borne out in all of its assertions by the contemporary material. Vergennes's fears expressed in all his correspondence from 1776 to the time of France's momentous decision, make it seem clear that Vergennes did not invent this motive for the alliance—the idea that the French government was confronted by the dilemma of war with England anyway, whether France allied itself with England or not. He does not in my opinion merely use this device to get the consent of the king and the other ministers to the plan he wished to pursue. But whether it is his

⁵⁰ Doniol, II, 632. Beaumarchais's letter, *ibid.*, p. 684.

⁵¹ Aff. Étr., *Mém. et Doc.*, France, vol. 1897, fol. 83.

⁵² Arch. Nat., K, 164, no. 3 (Corres. of Vergennes, no. 6; the date is merely December, 1777).

⁵³ Aff. Étr., *Corres. Pol., États-Unis, Supplément*, vol. 26, fols. 38-47. Doniol, II, 673, 655.

conviction or his device, the idea of the terrible dilemma remains the reason for the decision of the French cabinet. The king's letter of January 8, 1778, seems to dispose of any idea that Vergennes alone of the members of the French cabinet was possessed of this spectre of inevitable war. We may therefore accept, with as much confidence as historical evidence ever grants us as to the motives of men, the assertion of Vergennes in 1782, that France entered into alliance with the United States in the spring of 1778, because the king and his ministry were convinced that France was doomed to a war with Great Britain whether she formed the American alliance or not, but that it was the better policy to join with America and thus win her support rather than to wait for England to make peace with America, and then make war in company with her upon the House of Bourbon whose insular possessions would lie so completely at their mercy.

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